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ABSTRACT

A study examined the relation between formula ratings and student perception of both readability and interest in developmental reading/study skills and intermediate composition texts. Subjects, 200 composition students and 96 study skills students, responded to the statements "this text was easy to read" and "the text chapters were interesting" after doing significant amounts of reading of the texts. Readability scores for all texts using the Fry and Flesch formulas were determined and Flesch's human interest formula was applied to each text. Results indicated that, although there seemed to be a recognition of the readability difference between the two easiest to read books, students made less of a distinction among the books rated more difficult by the formulae. Results further showed a lack of agreement between students and formulae results on whether texts were interesting. Findings suggest that textbook writers have succeeded in making students feel that texts are readable but have had less success in making texts seem interesting. (Two tables of data are included.) (RS)

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Readability and Interest in College Textbooks: Student Perceptions

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In theory, writers of textbooks try to make them accessible to students who will use them. But how well do they succeed in making their material readable and/or interesting? Are the formulas used to determine these factors sensitive to nuances which contribute to text accessibility? A recent study of first-year composition texts (O'Hear & Ramsey, 1991) indicates that authors do succeed in making their texts readable, but do a less satisfactory job of making them interesting. That study also indicated that readability formulas may not be good measures of whether text is considered accessible by students. The present study examines the relation between formula ratings and student perception of both readability and interest in developmental reading/study skills and intermediate composition texts.

For this study, we selected two texts used in the intermediate composition course at our institution (Bazerman, 1989; Simon, 1988) and the reading/study skill texts used here and at a neighboring two-year technical school (Ellis, 1985; O'Hear, Aikman, & Weatherford, 1991). We obtained readability scores for all texts using both the Fry and the Flesch formulas and applied Flesch's human interest formula to each book. After students using each text(200 intermediate composition students, 96 study skills students) had done significant amounts of reading, we asked them to respond to the statements, "This text was easy to read," and "The text chapters were interesting." Responses were to be on a four-item Likert scale with 1 meaning "agree" and 4 meaning "disagree." A "0" option was included for those with no opinion. Results were

compared to readability and interest data to see whether student assessments agreed with formulae predictions.

The data appear in the tables below. We have included (with permission) results from the 1991 O'Hear and Ramsey study for comparison purposes.

Insert Table 1 about here.

Though there seems a recognition of the readability difference between the two easiest to read books, students make less of a distinction among the books rated more difficult by the formulae. Indeed, among the composition books, the two rated easier by the Fry formula are perceived as no easier than the three books rated as college level. Nor did students find the one book rated easier by Flesch (Bazerman) to be more readable than the others. In fact, its 1.86 rating indicates that students found this the least readable of the texts examined.

The data on interest ratings appear in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here.

Again, there is a lack of agreement between students and formulae results, but in a different direction. While all but one book were rated interesting by the Flesch formula, only one book received a mean student rating under 2.0 (partly agree). Indeed, two of the books labeled interesting by Flesch were rated nearer 3

(partly disagree) than 2 (partly agree) on the Likert scale. The one book rated less (mildly) interesting by the formula was rated as more interesting than two books with higher interest ratings on the Flesch formula.

The rankings above 2.0 show that large numbers of students did not agree that these books were interesting. 46.5% of the intermediate composition students disagreed or partly disagreed with the interest statement; 33.9% of the reading/study skills students were in these negative categories.

What this study shows is that students do recognize some gradation in text readability. However, they do not seem to feel that their skill development texts are hard to read at whatever level, regardless of formulae results. It seems that textbook writers have succeeded in making students feel that their texts are readable.

These writers have less success in making text seem interesting. Perhaps this is because service courses such as those surveyed do not hold a high subject interest for students, without which, devices to heighten human interest might have little chance to succeed. If students are working to develop writing or reading skills because the courses are required, there is reason to suppose that interest would be hard to develop. It may also be true that students find texts only moderately interesting because they do not expect them to be interesting. This would indicate a kind of Hawthorne effect; they feel a text will be uninteresting, so they overlook interest-rousers. A further factor influencing this

perception might be the familiarity of material. Because writing, reading, test-taking, etc. are things they have been doing for years, students may feel that courses emphasizing these skills lack the novelty present in courses such as philosophy, astronomy, and sociology.

A study of upper-division, major course texts is needed to see whether subject interest influences interest perception. If so, there may be little text writers can do to increase student perceptions of human interest in their texts.

Table 1

Formula Readability Scores and Mean Student Perception of Reading Ease for Study Skills and Composition Texts (Books from O'Hear and Ramsey Study are in Bold Face)

Book	Course	Flesch	Fry	Student Mean Perception
Ellis	Reading/ Study Skills	Standard	8th grade	1.41
O'Hear et al.	Reading/ Study Skills	Standard	8th grade	1.24
Daugherty	**First-Year Composition**	**Difficult**	**College**	**1.69**
Kinneavy	**First-Year Composition**	**Difficult**	**College**	**1.68**
Lauer	**First-Year Composition**	**Difficult**	**College**	**1.77**
Bazerman	Intermediate Composition	Fairly Difficult	11th grade	1.86
Simon	Intermediate Composition	Difficult	College	1.61

Table 2

Flesch Human Interest Scores and Mean Student Perception of Interest in Selected Texts (Books from O'Hear and Ramsey Study Appear in Bold Face)

Text	Level	Flesch Human Interest Score	Student Perception of Interest
Ellis	Reading/ Study Skills	Interesting	1.94
O'Hear	Reading/ Study Skills	Interesting	2.30
Daugherty	**First-Year Composition**	**Interesting**	**2.20**
Kinneavy	**First-Year Composition**	**Mildly Interesting**	**2.40**
Lauer	**First-Year Composition**	**Interesting**	**2.60**
Bazerman	Intermediate Composition	Interesting	2.85
Simon	Intermediate Composition	Interesting	2.32

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